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The personal side of international politics

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Riyadh, Saudi Arabia—Dick Walters, a tall, jowly veteran of the Central Intelligence Agency, cocked a bushy eyebrow, wagged a warning forefinger and transformed himself into a Russian.

He wasn't speaking Russian, exactly. Russian is not one of the eight languages he has mastered. But the words sounded like Russian, the mannerisms were precisely Russian, and suddenly he was a Soviet colonel—at least for the purposes of the story he was telling.

Dick Walters—better known as Lt. Gen. Vernon Walters (Ret.), former deputy director of the CIA—has a story for every occasion: involved parables about the Russian, the Englishman and the American captured by cannibals; the Russian, the American, the sleigh and the wolves, and hilarious old spy stories from his days in the CIA.

One tale, for example, is about the time he set up a secret meeting in a Paris cafe with a Soviet KGB colonel, and they both turned up in full uniform.

WALTERS, MASTER MIMIC, turned up here yesterday in a new guise. He was a senior adviser to Secretary of State Haig as Haig made a get-acquainted tour of the Middle East.

Walters' role was to help Haig with the personal side of the trip—the establishment of personal contacts with the nervous rulers and military leaders of the Middle East who are being asked to put their faith in—and stake their security on—the United States of America.

The opening of these personal contacts was one of three objectives for Haig's tour. It appears to have been the most successful. Haig has established friendly relationships with Egypt's President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. He got a warm reception from Jordan's King Hussein and the usual, cryptically cool hospitality from the rulers of Saudi Arabia.

But on the other two goals of his trip, Haig found rougher sledding. He failed to sell the Arabs his new strategy of halting Soviet expansionism as the prime source of danger in the Middle East. Both Hussein and the Saudi leaders think their main threat comes from Tel Aviv, not Moscow.

BEFORE FLYING to Rome today at the end of the Middle East part of his first trip abroad as secretary of state, Haig met with Saudi Arabia's King Khalid and Crown Prince Fahd. Afterward, an official Saudi statement reiterated the Saudis' "irrevocable" stand that "no just and durable peace can be reached in the Middle East before the recognition of the Palestinians' rights."

The Arab skepticism was spelled out with unusual frankness yesterday by Jordanian Foreign Minister Marwan Al Qasem. Although Haig reported a "substantial convergence of views with Jordanian officials," Qasem gave an altogether different impression.

Qasem demanded the withdrawal of all Israeli forces from Arab soil, the recognition of the Palestine Liberation Organization and the return of East Jerusalem. U.S. officials said that, in private, the Jordanians were more sympathetic to Haig's Soviet-focused strategy—but in public, they did not even mention it. The main danger, they argued, still is Israel.

Similarly, a Saudi newspaper greeted Haig here yesterday with the words: "Arabs are not ready to face unreal threats." The irony of the Arab reservations is that Haig's anti-Moscow campaign was specifically tailored to reassure vulnerable countries, such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia, that the U.S. would support them against Soviet-sponsored aggression and subversion.

BOTH COUNTRIES currently appear too nervous to welcome the new U.S. strategy. Until the U.S. beefs up its military presence in the region, the Arabs will feel vulnerable to threats from the Soviet-backed regimes in Afghanistan, South Yemen, Ethiopia and possibly Syria.

The paradox is that the U.S. will have a more difficult time beefing up its presence if Saudi Arabia and Jordan are reluctant to cooperate.

U.S. officials reported a new willingness in Saudi Arabia to stand up and be counted. Yesterday, it broke relations with Afghanistan, on the ground that that nation had become a Soviet puppet state. And the Saudis also are providing a base for four U.S. airborne warning and control planes (AWACS) that supply intelligence to both the U.S. and Saudi armed forces.

The problem is that when Haig talks to the Saudis about the Soviet threat, they reply that Israel is part of the "Soviet threat." Israel—not the Soviet Union—is the nation that threatens to absorb Arab soil, the Saudis believe.

Walters goes so far as to argue, however, that the specifics of Haig's policies are relatively unimportant. "Only Americans care about policy," he said before he left to accompany Haig to a meeting. "Once you leave the United States, it's personal relationships that really count."